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ABSTRACT

The eroticism which is often present in the classroom has potential creative or destructive power, while the creative use of eroticism depends on the acknowledgement that eroticism exists in some teacher-student relationships, the destructive effect of this eroticism--the denial of its existence--can be feelings of rejection (as seen in "Up the Down Staircase"). Self-acceptance and self-appreciation of eroticism (the new Narcissus) stimulates students' minds and leads to the freedom to appreciate their achievements. (JM)

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Eros, The New Narcissus, and Facilitating Self-Appreciation

The graffitti on students' desk tops often reveal the unacknowledged presence of eroticism in the classroom. Sometimes this eroticism exists in the fantasies of teachers and students as in Terry Southern's Candy or John Updike's The Centaur. Teachers and students seldom discuss this eroticism openly, but its potential creative or destructive power requires discussion, so I want to share some definitions, feelings and suggestions about Eros, The New Narcissus, and Facilitating Self-Appreciation.

In Hesoid's Theogony, Eros represented three powers: Eros co-ordinated the atoms of the universe; Eros brought harmony to chaos, and Eros permitted and stimulated life to develop.[1] People possess two of those three erotic powers. Our wills enable us to harmonize our chaotic thoughts and feelings in speech and writing. Our erotic feelings stimulate and nourish life to develop. Our erotic feelings and wills relate, and my experience tells me that they relate intimately. Arthur Schopenhauer unites erotic feeling with the will to live: "sexual passion is the kernel of the will to live, and consequently the concentration of all desire; therefore . . . I have called the genital organs the focus of will."[2] Schopenhauer's idea of the will to live resembles Henri Berson's idea of élan vital and Sigmund Freud's concept of libido. The will to live, élan vital, and libido all tend to unite wills with erotic feelings. Those ideas also locate the powers of Eros in the human psyche and thus help define what I mean by eroticism: the unity of our wills with our erotic feelings.

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Our creative use of eroticism depends on our acknowledging that eroticism exists in our classrooms and in some of our relationships with students. Gary Gildner creatively portrays such eroticism in:

Letter To A Substitute Teacher

Dear Miss Miller,
You are someone
too sweet to sleep alone
and I can't help myself

sitting here hearing
your soft voice so
I must tell you
I like you

very much and would like
to know you better.
I know there is a difference
in our age and race

but we do have something
in common--You're a girl
and I'm a boy
and that is all

we need. Please
do not look at me
like I'm silly or sick
and most of all

please do not reject
my very first love
affair. If you do
not feel the same

as I do please
tell me how I can forget
your unforgettable voice
that reminds me

of Larry the Duke's pet
birds in the morning,
your blue eyes like the
Blessed Virgin's,

your golden hair and your
nice red mouth. Please
give me some sign
of how you feel,

I would rather be hurt
than forgotten forever.
Sincerely yours,
The Boy in The Green Shirt.[3]

Although an appreciative eroticism flows from those lines, that eroticism also has great creative or destructive potential for the boy in the green shirt and Miss Miller. The fears of being rejected and forgotten take a most destructive direction in Bel Kaufman's Up The Down Staircase. In Up The Down Staircase, Alice Blake writes a love letter to her English teacher, Paul Barringer. Barringer marks the misspellings and criticizes the content as trite and repetitious. Alice takes Barringer's marks and criticism as rejection, and Alice's feelings of rejection cause her to attempt suicide. Barringer's later claim that Alice was neurotic troubles me, for I believe that he could have chosen to acknowledge and accept Alice's erotic feelings without satisfying her erotic feelings. I suspect, however, that Barringer was himself embarrassed by Alice's love letter and that his marking her misspellings and his criticizing her cliches really reveal his own fear of erotic feelings. Perhaps Barringer shared these feelings: "the teacher who responds to the sexual attractiveness of a pretty girl earns a lively interest which is not liking or respect but a measure of contempt."[4] I really doubt if Alice Blake would have held Barringer in contempt if he would have acknowledged and appreciated her eroticism. I suggest that Barringer's fears reveal that he himself had not yet learned how to accept and appreciate his own eroticism. Self-acceptance and self-appreciation of our own eroticism preconditions our creative acceptance and appreciation of student eroticism. In his celebrated book, When Teachers Face Themselves, Arthur T. Jersild urges acknowledgement and self-acceptance of eroticism: "call it what we will sex, Eros, the emotion tied to life's passion to renew life, cannot be denied. Whether we regard it as an expression of human love or as an elemental physical force, we must face its power and seek to be at home with its promptings if we would take the first step toward accepting or understanding ourselves."[5] When we accept and appreciate the beauty and power of our eroticism, then

we are teaching, by example, the acceptance and appreciation of student's erotic feelings.

This self-acceptance and self-appreciation of eroticism defines the new Narcissus. Not the old Narcissus who denied and imprisoned his own erotic power by rejecting Echo, but the new Narcissus who accepts and appreciates his or her erotic will as powerful and her or his erotic feelings as beautiful. In his Songs to Narcissus, Paul Valery praises the power and beauty of the new Narcissus: "Admire in Narcissus the eternal return toward the mirror of the water which offers his image to his love, and to his beauty all his knowledge. All my fate is obedience to the force of my love. Body, I surrender to your sole power; ... What, O my Beauty, can I do that thou dost not will?"[6] The new Narcissus also nurtures the inquiring mind with stimulation and freedom, and as Albert Einstein observed the inquiring mind needs such stimulation and freedom for survival and growth: "It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without [freedom], [inquiry] goes to wrack and ruin without fail."[7]

One concrete manifestation of this freedom results when students become free to appreciate what they can do effectively, and I have found that student self-appreciation charts encourages that freedom. For example, chronic misspellers begin to improve their spelling when they become free to appreciate that in a five hundred word theme they have spelled four hundred and fifty words correctly and that they can improve the other fifty. If the student who has traumatic feelings about his misspellings becomes free to appreciate that he has only transposed two letters of a twelve letter word and that he has ten letters correct, he will become freer to improve all of his misspellings. Self-appreciation graphs are very simple to keep.

Plot the theme numbers on the horizontal coordinate and the skills to be appreciated on the vertical; thus a student who charts his forty-five effective sentences becomes free to believe he can improve his other three ineffective sentence fragments, and when he believes he can improve, he will improve.

The new Narcissus acknowledges, accepts, and appreciates his eroticism. Such self-appreciation facilitates student appreciation of their own eroticism. The mutual appreciation stimulates and nourishes the inquiring mind and facilitates the freedom to appreciate actual accomplishments and potential improvements.

Footnotes

[1]Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1959), p. 149.

[2]The World As Will and Idea, trans. by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1896) III, 314.

[3]First Practice (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1969), pp. 62-63.

[4]Joseph J. Schwab, "Eros and Education: A Discussion of One Aspect of Discussion," Journal of General Education (October, 1945), p. 56.

[5]When Teachers Face Themselves (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1955), p. 105.

[6]Translated by Herbert Marcuse in Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 149.

[7]Will It Grow In A Classroom, eds. Beatrice and Ronald Gross (New York: Delacorte Press, 1974), p. xvii.